

Chicago Tribune, February 12, 2008

In an effort to help combat identity theft and fraud, two Illinois congressmen are expected to introduce legislation Tuesday they hope will enhance the security features of Social Security cards.

The proposed cards would feature a photograph and fingerprint, as well as a computer chip, bar code and magnetic strip. The cards would be modeled after the Common Access Card issued by the Department of Defense, mostly to active military reserve members and their dependents, said U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.), a sponsor of the bill. Current Social Security cards have limited security features and have no photo or biometric data, he said.

"One of the ways that modern criminals use to attack ... is by falsifying or counterfeiting Social Security cards," Kirk said. "We think that a Social Security card should be hard to forge [and] that it should also make it easy to catch an identity-theft crime."

Waukegan Police Chief Bill Biang said that a counterfeit Social Security card can be bought for \$200 to \$500.

U.S. Rep. Peter Roskam (R-Ill.), co-sponsor of the bill, said that more than \$49 billion a year is lost because of identity theft. According to a 2005 report by the Government Accountability Office, employers reported the use of 1.4 million Social Security numbers that don't exist.

The new cards would also enable employers to verify their employees' Social Security numbers more easily, Roskam said.

More than 12 million Social Security cards are issued every year to adults, and the legislation would require anyone older than 15 to have a new card. Production costs for the new cards would be nearly \$8 a card, up from about 50 cents now, Kirk said, and each card would take about 15 minutes to make.

Kirk stressed that the new card would not be a panacea to identity theft and fraud, but would help victims prove their identity.

"The point is not to make a big step, but to make a modest upgrade," he said.